

## After the Storm

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Summary: Six minus five equals one, and one is a very lonely number. Somewhat AU? Reviews are welcomed.

### After the Storm

Waking up wasn't hard. Spartans could go for days without any real sleep, and getting it didn't change things; sleep brought comfort, and comfort was unnecessary. But even as his eyes flicked open before daylight had begun to steal through the window, he found it difficult to think of a good reason to stir.

The days blurred together now, so empty and so repetitive it all seemed like a dull dream. It hadn't always been like that, not by a long shot; war kept one busy. And it wasn't just the fighting, it was the people you fought alongside. Teammates. Family. A family you sweated and bled for, squabbled with, shared secrets and swapped stories with. But they were gone now, bright colors replaced by a dismal grey void.

He had learned to stop trying to reason why it hurt more to think of losing five individuals than it did to consider the loss of an entire world. Halsey and his Spartan-II brothers and sisters were gone, but thinking of their demise brought a dull ache, not the sharp pain Noble's end caused. He wasn't sure whether it was right to miss them more, or if it even mattered. Ever since he saw the burned-out husk that had once been his home, thinking and feeling had become a rather messy business. The doctors called it "post-traumatic stress."

Spartans don't break, Chief Mendez's voice growled through his memory. You are beyond conventional. You do not hesitate. You do not dwell on the past. Everything you are must be focused on the here and now, so you can complete the mission. So you can survive.

But Spartans, despite their upgrades, were humans like everyone else - broken, flawed, imperfect humans. Jun hadn't quite been able to

hide his damages; the emptiness was always there, shadowing his banter. Emile would never stoop so low as to let anyone see his cracks, so he carved them on his visor and made a boast of them. Carter and Kat kept each other strong - it hurt to think of how it must have been for only one of them to keep going. And Six, he hadn't known her long enough to really figure out her troubles, but Spartan-IIIs tended to be damaged goods; it was what made them.

Jorge had never slowed. Never broken his stride. Never bent to anything that tried to blow him off course, not even with the pressure of Reach on his shoulders. Rock-solid. He tried to grasp what that actually meant. Finally he figured himself out, after weeks of struggling to accept the cracks in his own core.

He hadn't stayed strong because he was the best, had the most fortitude. His team needed him to be their rock, and so he was - it was natural, and had actually fooled him into thinking he was unbreakable. But now his team was gone, and it felt as if his skin had been ripped away, exposing vulnerable insides. They were dead because he had failed to protect them - teleported himself to the ass-end of the galaxy thinking he was doing some great thing. It hadn't worked. And he had come undone upon finding that out.

Now he just existed. The war was over, but the battle continued. Others went off to fight while he lingered and did whatever the ONI told him to do. He wanted to put on his armor, pick up a gun, catch the next flight to the thickest scrap - but it was a fanciful notion at the present.

As he had for weeks now, he got out of bed. He avoided looking at his reflection during the morning rituals, even though he knew full well a good shave was long past due. Sitting on what passed for a bureau were several bottles of pills; most were antidepressants, but one bottle in particular was very necessary. He could skimp on the happy pills and nobody would fuss, but skimping on these could be fatal.

I should have died on that Corvette. Nobody's supposed to survive that sort of radiation. Nobody. The burns had left scarring on his face and neck, and he wasn't ready to have it all corrected yet. So why am I alive? It felt like some fickle, sadistic deity had set him apart for an increasingly bitter fate, one that he didn't quite want to face. Does that make me a coward? Or is this what being human is really like - feeling powerless?

He swallowed the pills dry and glanced at the door. Outside was a sterile world, a world dominated by the ONI and the constricting nature of Spartanhood. He wished he could just find a nice quiet field somewhere and watch the sky, feel the breeze on his face, but that wasn't an option. For the first time in his life, he found himself truly despising his circumstances.

But perhaps today will be different. Maybe they'll find something I can really do, not just menial work. Maybe I'll get a message from another II. Lately he'd been obsessively checking and rechecking his inbox, wishing one of the few IIs to survive the war would send something his way. But nothing ever came. Maybe they think I'm dead and no one will ever contact me.

He could almost hear Emile's cynical drawl: \_"See, big man, doesn't matter that you had the most heart. Doesn't matter you tried so hard to be human, make friends, show 'em you cared. 'Cause in the end, they forget you. Humans are assholes. Why even try helping them, when they'll never help you?"\_

\_No, \_he fought back, but the truth of it stung. He remembered smashing his fist into the wall after seeing what Reach had become, how the arse of a captain had ordered him \_tranquilized\_ for everyone's safety. Spartans weren't allowed to vent, or even grieve. It was \_dangerous\_.

But here he was, sitting at the end of his bed, thinking himself into a deep hole. \_Am I dangerous? \_Nobody really tried to sympathize with him, just treated him like a time bomb; he wondered if they were right to do so. But as much as he tried to rationalize it, it still broke his heart. Emile had been right. Nobody would remember how good he ever tried to be, because he would always be a threat.

\_C'mon. Stop that. You've got to get up and report for therapy. \_Coming back to the present was hard; it felt like coming up for air after a deep dive, except the water was perfectly breathable too. Jorge took in a breath and exhaled slowly, and looked at himself in the mirror. His reflection was pale and scarred and even a little stretched, cheekbones more gaunt than he remembered. He stood. Scowled.

"You're still alive," he said aloud. "Make it count."

\_Am I? \_he couldn't help thinking, even as he passed through the doorway.

End  
file.